

Hidden Will. by Genevie

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Summary:

Will's side of the story, from the upside-down.

Hidden Will.

Joyce had insisted on naming him Will.

Not as in William, though that's what his birth certificate stated, but like the word, the concept. Free will. Strong will. Choice. Desire. Determination. As Lonnie's son, she knew he'd need to carry those things inside of him always, and she hoped that this small-seeming gesture would one day serve as a reminder that she, at least, had believed in him for the entirety of his life.

When he was old enough to understand, she would pull him into her lap and whisper reminders of that belief into his ear whenever he was hurt, or scared, or sad, and he would tense up in her arms and try to find the will to call her a liar. He was boy terrified of his father's thunder and of the way the laughter of his peers fell on him like a downpour. A boy prone to nightmares. Prone to tears. Prone to running away instead of standing his ground. A boy whose life felt driven not by his own force but by the rush of everyone else's.

He felt so warm in his mother's arms, though, so safe and so relaxed, that he could never bring himself to speak out. Instead, he closed his eyes and pretended that he was the prince and she was the queen, and he had just fought away the fearsome and blood-starved dragon living beneath their castle. That was why she held him, he told himself. That was why she praised his will.

The first key to hiding is to become small and quiet and unassuming. It's about knowing how to slip into small places undetected, about having the finesse to cease existing outside of a single pocket of space. This, Will knows in the same way that he knows how to walk, how to speak, how to read. Lonnie didn't teach him how to hide, but he ingrained it in him all the same.

Being familiar with your surroundings is the second key.

Will runs, frantic, feet slamming hard against the ground, squelching noises rising as he lands on piles of rotting leaves, on smears of mucous, on thick clusters of slugs. All around him the forest stretches

long and wide, unforgiving in its openness, but he is no stranger to the alignment of its trees and to the best paths to take between them, even here where everything is not-quite-right.

When his muscles begin to melt into pools of churning acid, he keeps running; when his breathing becomes wheezing so severe that his entire chest aches, he keeps running; when he feels dizzy from exertion, he keeps running. Finally, he finds the hollowed-out tree stump near the cliff and dives inside, curling up at its bottom, conforming his body to its curve.

It's harder to fit into now than it was when he was younger. His body cramps and pieces of wood jut out into his back and the tips of his shoes catch the faint moonlight, but it will have to do. Small and quiet and unassuming, he ceases to exist.



Morning does not dawn but rather slips into existence wearing the cold black cloak of night, and Will wakes into it with the sick feeling that he's been cloistered away for too long. There is another key to hiding that he knows he's neglected: you must not linger, or you will miss some things. You will lose sight of other things.

And the world will lose sight of you, too.

Cautiously, he rises to his feet. A bioluminescent dust floats in the air. Sheets of mucous fall like vines from the branches of trees otherwise bare. Patches of the ground writhe with the movement of slugs. Everything is silent except for the wind swirling across the ground, its whistles soft and eerie, a ghostly hymn.

He checks his watch. Six-o'clock in the morning. Nine hours after he went missing. Nine.

It's time to stop hiding. It's time to go home.



Will runs towards the kitchen but he isn't fast enough. With one lunge, the demogorgon is so close behind him that he can feel its breath on the back of his scalp; with one swipe, it sends him flying

into the wall. The impact knocks the air from his lungs. It shocks him with a whole-body pain worse than anything he has ever felt. Willing himself not to let it overwhelm him requires an almost insurmountable effort.

Almost.

The demogorgon swings at him again and he dodges, clumsily, slamming against the phone in the process, knocking it from the hook. His balance falters and he crashes to the floor, inciting new pain in his knees and in his wrists, but also filling him with renewed purpose.

He understands the stakes, now. He knows what he's up against.

And he knows he's not alone. As he gathers the strength to rise to his feet again, he hears a voice coming from the phone. "Hello?" it says, repeating itself once. That's all it takes. That one word, spoken twice, tells him all that he needs to know. Every part of him wants to grab the receiver, to tell Joyce that he's all right, but the demogorgon is approaching him with the predatory confidence of believing its prey is trapped, and Will only has enough time for one move.

This is his territory. He knows it in ways the demogorgon does not. Throwing the phone towards the monster, he buys himself a moment as small and as precious as a diamond and he wills himself to run.



It is a bad idea, he knows, to return to the decomposing shell of his house so soon but it's only here where he feels like he's inches away from home; only here where the faint light of familiarity is enough to feed his sense of hope.

A different phone is plugged into the jack now. It sits on the edge of one of the living room chairs, which has been pulled up close enough that the phone can be placed on its cushion. Without hesitating—without even wondering what happened to the last phone—he picks up the receiver. Joyce answers almost immediately and he feels a flicker of relief work its way through him. She's been waiting for him. She knows he's here.

“Mom,” he says, but his voice can't seem to reach her. He tries again, “Mom,” still nothing. On his next attempt, he focuses extra hard on the projection of his voice and on the phone in his hand. He considers Joyce's nearness to him, and he thinks about how badly he wants to go home, and in this way he wills his voice to carry across dimensions. “Mom,” he says a third time, and it works.

The lock on the front door wiggles violently, desperately. Will can hear the frustrated wails of the demogorgon rise like a battle cry behind him, and he knows that he can't stay here any longer. “I'm sorry,” he tries to say into the phone, but his focus is too divided and his voice stays here with him, unheard. It hurts to ignore her pleas for him to talk to her, but he has no other choice. Dropping the receiver, he rushes out the back door and into the forest.

He expects to hear the demogorgon screaming behind him—expects to see it whenever he looks over his shoulders—but it is never there. It never leaves the house. Which can only mean that it doesn't want him, now.

It wants Joyce.

Turning around so fast that he almost falls, Will rushes back inside to find the demogorgon halfway through a gate in the wall. On the other side of that gate, his home shimmers with light and warmth and he has to swallow down the impulse to dive into it, right here, right now, demogorgon be damned. He grabs a cast iron pan from the kitchen and hurls it at the monster, missing, barely, but still attracting its attention.

When it withdraws back into the upside-down, the gate closes behind it. Telling himself that it's okay, that he hasn't just missed his one chance to leave this place, Will takes a deep breath, steadies his stance, and holds his ground as the demogorgon charges him.

As soon as it's almost close enough to reach him, Will dives to the side and scrambles into the bathroom, locking the door. After taking a few moments to catch his breath, he opens the window and leaps outside to the sound of the lock rattling behind him, grateful that while the demogorgon may be strong, it sure as hell isn't smart.



For the third time, Will returns to the house that's home-but-not-home. It is still a questionable decision; that still does not stop him.

There is a tingle in the air now, an electric buzz swarming above his head. When he raises his hands, electricity is drawn to his fingers like they're made of metal. Goosebumps rise up his arms. His hair stands on its ends. As he moves from the kitchen back into the living room, his arms always in the air, static constantly flowing into his fingers, he realises what's causing the buzzing.

Hundreds of Christmas lights are dangling from the ceiling. They are in the kitchen and the living room, in the hallway, in the bedrooms. He wishes that he could see them better, wishes that they were lit. He's sure they look magical, strung up like stars in the night sky, or like distant planets shining pink and green and blue.

They are not here to be pretty, he knows, but he takes this moment anyway. Everything is so dark, so colourless. Thinking about the vibrancy of the other side of the world helps in small ways. Things like Christmas lights still exist for his friends and his family. They will exist for him again, too, when he's back where he belongs.

It's difficult for him to sense Joyce in the house, and at first he wonders if she's even home. He finds her alone in the kitchen, her presence a bare tremble in the air. She is hiding, too, but not from him. Not from the demogorgon.

He raises his hands again, and he begins walking away from her, hitting the lights he passes with his tips of his fingers, hoping that they're shining where she is. Attracting her attention takes him a couple of attempts, but soon he feels her following him like a summer's breeze at his back, warm and encouraging. When he slides inside of the cupboard built into the living room wall, she does, too, and when she asks him to speak to her through the ball of lights she's holding he doesn't hesitate. *Yes, mom, I'm here; yes, I'm alive. No, I'm not safe.*

When yes and no stop being enough, she paints the alphabet onto the wall and arranges 26 lights above it, letting him know that this is

how they can talk.

By now, he's been in the cupboard for over an hour. It is by far the longest amount of time he's spent in the house without the demogorgon finding him, and he thinks that maybe that means something. Could the monster not know how to search for its prey? Does it track him based on something other than scent and sight and sound? Maybe it's like all monsters are, a beast of emotion at its core, drawn to the way he is feeling, or to the way Joyce is feeling, or to how their emotions bounce off each other. If that's true, then he's putting her at risk.

But he can't think that way. They're so damned close to finding each other that he doesn't want to give up now—doesn't want to have to hide from his mom, too.

He emerges to answer her questions, and when the demogorgon bursts through the back door before he can do anything more than tell her that he's right here, right beside her, he becomes so frustrated that tears burn at the back of his eyes and he becomes consumed by the sudden urge to fight back, to destroy the demogorgon, to raze the entire upside-down until there is nothing left to stop him from getting home.

But he is no brave prince trained in the art of battling monsters; no saviour capable of a victory this great. He uses the lights to tell Joyce to run, and then he, too, flees.



The phone is not enough. The lights are not enough. They are gates only in small ways, and they provide only small comforts. Will spends the rest of the night and most of the next day holed up in Castle Byers, willing himself to figure out how to make actual gates between worlds, like the ones the demogorgon creates seemingly from nothing.

It isn't like using electricity as a conduit. He has to dig deeper inside of himself—he has to push himself harder. The larger barriers between dimensions are not influenced by what he wants, what he needs, how he feels. So he doesn't think about Joyce and Jonathan

and his friends, or of school, or of entire Sundays spent in basements not as Will Byers but as Will the Wise. Instead, he focuses on a single part of the wall and he thinks about grasping the fabric of reality between his fingers and tearing holes into its core.

By noon, he's managed a single fingerprint-sized window, too solid to penetrate but thin enough that when he looks through it like one looks through a peephole, he can see the uncorrupted forest on the other side. And when he presses his ear against it he's met with the sound of birds singing, of squirrels searching for food through the dead leaves carpeting the ground, not wet with mucous but perfectly dry.

Because it is progress, he ignores how much more tired he feels. He is not dizzy, he tells himself, he is simply focused. Nothing is wrong—nothing can be wrong—when he is this close to a breakthrough. Continuing on like this, it isn't much longer before he manages to grow the gate so large that he could fit through it if only he knew how to shatter its glassy surface.

He thinks that none of what he's accomplished thus far, with the phone and with the electricity, with the lights, would have been possible if Joyce hadn't been waiting on the other end, frantically building the other side of their bridge between dimensions. Maybe the glass is on her end. Maybe she needs to be the one who shatters it before he can be pulled through.



His fingers are bloody from passing back and forth in circles across the rough wood panelling, but he barely notices. The wall is fading beneath his touch and little by little he can see the underside of the living room wallpaper, its faint floral pattern emerging in places where the barrier is thin enough to let light and colour shine through.

The sound of movement rises from the forest and Will cocks his ear in its direction, listening, trying to gauge how far away the demogorgon is (because what else could it be, there's no other life here besides the slugs and he isn't sure they count as being alive), measuring its pace through the frequency of its footsteps.

He doesn't have much time.

He thinks to run.

Then, he thinks he's ran enough.

"Mom," he calls out, again and again, indifferent to his own noise, too, because it is already too late; they have already been discovered. When she doesn't answer back, his words become whimpers and he starts pounding his fists against the wall until finally—finally—she hears him.

It takes her a while to figure out where, exactly, he is, but she does find him eventually, like she always does, and she tears away the wallpaper between them. And then, there she is, right on the other side of the gate. Obscured by the amber-like surface but only inches away. When she presses her hands to the wall he does, too, and all the scaffolding he's been building around himself falls like dust to the ground. He feels like he can't hold himself up any longer. He is tired of fighting, of running, of hiding. He wants his mom to bring him home.

They both know the demogorgon is coming, but Joyce knows before Will does that she can't do anything for him right now. Even when she begs him to run, to hide, to save himself, he hesitates. This isn't what he wants to hear. It's not what he wants to do. He pleads to Joyce. He tells himself that maybe if he focuses just a little harder for just a little longer, then the gate will open for him.

"Run," Joyce says, and he wills himself to accept that he has failed, to be all right with that, to believe her when she says she's coming for him. Gathering all the strength he has left inside of himself, he runs away.

By the time he reaches Castle Byers, it feels like time has been accelerated forwards by days, by weeks, by months. The air is suddenly colder, brittle like a thin sheet of ice. Each breath he takes feels like he's inhaling tiny shards of glass into his lungs. He doesn't lay on the mattress as much as he collapses into it, tired and weak and listless.

None of this surprises him. He knows he's been pushing himself too hard, and he has known from the moment that he first tasted the air here, acrid at the back of his throat, that the atmosphere is toxic. Through sheer will he'd been keeping the sickness at bay, convinced that he was still well. That he still had time.

Now, though, he doesn't know what he has. There is nothing left to try. There are no lights where he is, no telephones, no people. Pressing a finger against the wall, he tries to open a new window but he can't even inspire a hairline crack of hope to shine through. Part of him wishes he had stayed near the house so he could curl back up in the cupboard in the wall. There, at least, he'd be easier to find; there, he'd get to fade against the backdrop of his family's voices rumbling like a purr around him. But he doesn't want to lure the demogorgon to the house ever again. Castle Byers is the only safe place for him, and for his family, and all he can do is believe that by isolating himself, he can still protect everyone in this single, small-seeming way.



There is a hand in his, tiny and warm and unsure. It is not a hand that feels like it knows how to hold others but it is trying, which makes him want to try, too. He thinks he hears a girl's voice telling him that his mom is coming, and he thinks that he answers it with, "hurry," but he isn't sure of what's real and what isn't right now and he's too tried to sort through such thoughts.

He slips back into unconsciousness hoping that if the girl does exist, then she is reaching out to him from somewhere else. He wants to believe that no one else will ever know this place the way that he does.



When next he recovers, he fights to stay awake.

The memory of the girl's touch is a tickle in the centre of his palm; her words, a rolling echo in his thoughts. He decides, right or wrong, that he is going to believe she is real and that everything she said is also real. He decides that he will fight to stay alive.

"Should I stay or should I go now," he sings. The repetition is meditative. It gives him a sense of focus, helps him to keep breathing. Even though his bones are like ice and the world is spinning around him so quickly that he can't see straight, he starts to feel a familiar warmth spreading like small caresses across his jaw and his temples, and blooming in the palms of his hands, and building up in the places on his back where his mother's arms connect in a hug; where Jonathan's arms do the same.

Joyce had told him that she was coming for him, and he lets himself believe this. He lets himself have hope.

It isn't Joyce who finds him, though.

Will tries to defend himself against the demogorgon, lunging and clawing at the monster, swinging and kicking, grabbing everything he can find and throwing it in all directions. Whether he's doing these things to hurt the demogorgon, or to distract it, or to delay it, he doesn't know. He isn't thinking anything through. There is nothing left inside of him besides this urge to defeat the enemy, this will to survive.

But he is to the demogorgon what a fruit fly is to him. The fight ends before it begins.



Everything comes in flashes. The demogorgon's claws against his skin, surprisingly gentle, never breaking his flesh. The mucous wrapping around him like a spider's silk. The slime of the slug slipping past his lips; the bitter taste of it in his throat. Though he knows his airways are blocked, he gasps for breath with desperate hunger. It isn't even about him anymore. His mom is coming, and she's a good mom, a loving mom, a hard-working mom. She doesn't deserve to find him like this.

The air is too thin. What little he inhales isn't nearly enough to sate his lungs. He does not give up but he does, inevitably, fade away.



As he slips further under, Will hears his mother's voice dozens of times. She does not say anything relevant to his circumstances. Just small things, his favourite snippets. Kind words shared during low moments, stories woven together based on his prompts, jokes that she can barely deliver before she starts laughing. Deep down inside, he knows that she isn't here with him, but he allows himself this one last fantasy.

Then, something about her voice shifts.

I love you so much.

I love you more than anything in the world.

It is not the strong voice of his imagination, the kind voice of his dreams. It is raw and imperfect, pained in ways he's never heard before.

Please.

Please.

Come back to me.

Please.

It is natural. It is real.

Just wake up.

He is trying.

Breathe.

He is trying so damned hard.

I need you to breathe.

There's something pounding against his chest, and he wills himself to focus on it instead—wills his body to cooperate, wills his lungs to fill with air, wills himself to keep on living.

Breathe.

Almost. Just one more shock to his chest. Just one more plea. Just one more moment.

Breathe.

He breathes.



Later, when he is back home again, for real this time, for good, Joyce pulls him into her arms and she says, "I didn't want to jinx us by reminding you in the hospital, but hey, this is why I named you Will."

And this time, he doesn't think about princes and queens and dragons, about victories both grand and noble, about being the saviour. Instead, he realises that he gets it, now; that sometimes, will is a quiet thing, overlooked and forgotten, maybe even hidden in the face of fear, but it is there when it matters. Strong and enduring and irrefutable.